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Abstract

Sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) have higher rates of bullying than their heterosexual peers and must disproportionately cope with bullying victimization. The purpose of this research is to highlight various coping strategies employed by SGMY. We conducted 20 cross-sectional, semi-structured online interviews with SGMY about their bullying experiences and coping strategies. We coded interviews with descriptive qualitative research to illustrate a comprehensive summary of bullying-related coping methods. We found SGMY engage in multiple coping strategies that include (1) emotion-focused coping—rumination; self-harm and considering or attempting suicide; seeking social and emotional support; engaging in creative endeavors; self-acceptance and community connectedness—and (2) problem-focused coping—reporting the bully; confronting the bully; conceal orientation; ignoring the bullying; and changing environment. Additionally, most SGMY reported using multiple coping techniques or changing how they coped over time (i.e., coping flexibility). These findings can inform future interventions to promote positive coping mechanisms among SGMY.

Keywords: SGMY, Sexual minority, Gender minority, Bullying, Coping, Qualitative

Running Header: How SGMY Cope with Bullying Victimization

"It's not okay for you to call me that": How Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Cope with Bullying Victimization

Sexual minority and gender minority (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) youth (SGMY) are more likely to experience bullying and violence compared to their peers (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Blondeel et al., 2018; Bouris, Everett, Heath, Elsaesser, & Neilands, 2016; Friedman et al., 2011; Hightow-Weidman et al., 2011; Marshall, Yarber, Sherwood-Laughlin, Gray, & Estell, 2015). The 2017 GLSEN National School Climate Survey consisted of 10,528 students aged 13-21 from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and represented 3,095 unique school districts. The survey found 98.5% of SGMY reported hearing anti-LGBT remarks at school, 70.1% reported verbal harassment at school in the past year, and 28.9% reported physical harassment at school in the past year (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Additionally, the National Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) consisting of 15,624 students in grades 9-12 found sexual minority youth were more likely than their heterosexual peers to be bullied at school (34.2% vs. 18.4%) and online (28.0% vs 14.1%) (Kann et al., 2016). The YRBSS also found SGMY were twice as likely to had felt sad or hopeless in the past 12 months (60.4% vs. 26.4%) and almost three times as likely to have attempted suicide in the past 12 months compared to their heterosexual peers (42.8% vs. 14.8%). To contextualize bullying within the current environment, the Human Rights Campaign conducted a survey of 50,000 U.S. youth (SGMY and cisgender heterosexual youth) aged 13–18: since the 2016 presidential election, 70% of participants had witnessed bullying, hate messages or harassment during or since the election, with participants noting that 63% of incidents were motivated by sexual orientation discrimination and 54% by were motivated by gender expression discrimination (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). These findings are consistent with increased reports of hate crimes and discrimination within US schools since 2016 (Vara-Orta, 2018).

Taken together, these findings highlight the current hostile environments and health sequelae faced by many SGMY.

Meyer's Minority Stress Model (2003) posits that sexual and gender minority individuals have poorer health because they are exposed to chronic stress resulting from the discrimination they experience because of their minority sexual orientations and gender identities (Meyer, 2003). As such, SGMY must constantly cope with the stress of growing up in heteronormative and cisnormative environments. Among a study of 245 sexual minority youth aged 21-25 from San Francisco, Toomey at al. (2018) used retrospective reports during adolescence (ages 13-19) to identify minority stress coping. The authors found sexual minority youth coped with LGB-specific strategies (e.g., involvement with LGBT organizations), alternative seeking strategies (e.g., looking for places to spend time that felt safer or more accepting) and cognitive strategies (e.g., just trying to put it all out of your mind) (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2018).

Coping is defined as "individuals' constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands appraised as taxing or exceeding their resources" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Within coping, empirical evidence suggests two broad types of coping: emotion-focused and problem-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping centers on buffering and managing the negative emotional effect of stress. Problem-focused coping centers on directly resolving the stress (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Herman & Tetrick, 2009). One common emotion-focused coping mechanism is rumination, which is defined as the repeated focusing on the circumstances surrounding the bullying events (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Among a study of high school students in the Netherlands, Garnefski & Kraaij (2014) found greater rumination strengthened the effects of bullying victimization on depression and anxiety (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014). Moreover, other coping mechanisms suggests that

SGMY may seek online and in-person social support, employ cognitive reappraisal (i.e., an emotion regulation strategy to change the trajectory of an emotional response by reinterpreting the situation) (Ray, McRae, Ochsner, & Gross, 2010), and stressor avoidance (i.e., changing social environments) to cope with negative stressors (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015; Grossman, 2009). Additionally, among a sample of young adult (aged 18-22) sexual minority males and transgender females from the Midwest, Bry et al. (2018) identified various asset-based and resource-based coping strategies, which included confrontation, acceptance and forgiveness, future orientation, social supports, and using a mediator (Bry, Mustanski, Garofalo, & Burns, 2018). Collectively, current literature suggests SGMY actively engage in multiple coping strategies to manage minority stressors such as bullying victimization.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress is a product between a person and their complex environment. Further, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that strategies for coping vary from situation to situation and that coping fluidity can be beneficial in adapting to different stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). Thus, coping mechanisms are constantly changing based on unique environments and stressors. To further explore SGMY coping and coping flexibility directly related the bullying bullying victimization faced by SGMY, we conducted online qualitative interviews with 20 SGMY from across the United States. The main goal of this study was to explore how SGMY coped with bullying victimization through exploratory, in-depth online interviews.

Methods

Participants

As part of a larger study to design an online intervention to help SGMY cope with bullying experiences, 20 SGMY participated in semi-structured interviews via Skype. We

recruited SGMY with targeted advertisements on Facebook and Instagram from November 2016 through January 2017. Individuals completed an online screening questionnaire. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to be 14 to 18 years old, live in the United States, identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and report bullying victimization experiences in the past six months. We defined bullying victimization experiences as being the victim of physical or verbal attacks, being excluded from activities, or spreading rumors, with any of these experiences occurring either online or in person (Moran, Chen, & Tryon, 2018).

The demographic composition of the sample can be found in Table 1. The median age of the sample was 16 years old. Seven participants self-identified as White, four as mixed-race, four as Black, three as Hispanic/Latino, and two as Asian. Ten participants were cisgender girls, four were cisgender boys, two were transgender, and four were another gender identity. Ten participants identified as bisexual, six as lesbian, and four as gay. Participants were represented from 14 states including: Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Hawaii, California, Arizona, Texas, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Alabama, Indiana, South Carolina, Virginia, and Michigan.

Procedures

The lead author who is trained in qualitative data methodology conducted the interviews via Skype. The benefits of using Skype to interview participants include removing barriers such as access and distance and providing comfort to participants to speak in a neutral and safe location of their choice (Hanna, 2012; Seitz, 2016). Participants had the option to use video during the interview; however, we only recorded and saved the audio. Prior to starting the interview, participants were read the description of the study, what their involvement entailed, any risks associated with their involvement, and the number of a national LGBTQ support hotline where participants could call after the interview for further support and the direct number

of the principal investigator. Participants were also given the option to skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering. We asked if participants were in a private and comfortable space and if they were free to talk for the next hour; if not, participants were given the option to reschedule. We had a waiver of parental consent to protect the privacy of all participants and we attained verbal assent from participants for their participation. Data was stored on university owned and protected cloud storage and access to the data was accessed only by the principal investigator, interviewer, trained transcriptionist, and coders. The interviewer encouraged participants to refrain from saying any names during the interview; regardless, all identifying information was removed during the redaction process. Because we had a waiver to document consent, we only collected email address, phone numbers, and Skype usernames of participants. This information was kept in a secure drive, separate from any interview recordings or transcriptions, and deleted after interviews, so the resultant data could not be linked to identifiable participant information. The University of Pittsburgh Human Research Protections Office approved all study procedures.

The interviewer used a semi-structured interview guide designed to cover the following domains: favorite aspects about school; experiences of witnessing bullying; personal experiences with bullying victimization; ways of coping with bullying victimization; and bullying prevention techniques. Example interview questions included: “What did you do after the bullying incident? How did you feel after it happened? What kind of support did you receive after you were bullied? What kind of help or resources would you have liked to have received?” Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, and we emailed participants a $15 iTunes gift card as compensation for their time.

Analytic Strategy

Study staff transcribed the audio-recorded interviews and redacted all identifiers. The coding team, consisting of 4 researchers, read through 3 transcripts and created an initial codebook using a hierarchical coding scheme (Saldaña, 2013). The study applied descriptive qualitative research to illustrate a comprehensive summary of bullying victimization and coping strategies among SGMY (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010; Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). The team then individually coded a second set of 3 interviews using the initial codebook, and convened to refine and finalize the codebook. The lead author coded the remaining interviews, and the second author double-coded half of the transcripts to ensure coding fidelity. We used NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) to organize data and complete the analysis.

Results

Coping Techniques

We identified ten main coping strategies employed by SGMY in response to online and face-to-face bullying. Five of these strategies were emotion-focused (rumination; self-harm, considering or attempting suicide; seeking social and emotional support; engaging in creative endeavors; self-acceptance and community connectedness) and five were problem-focused (reporting the bully; confronting the bully; conceal orientation; ignoring the bullying; and changing environment).

Emotion-Focused Coping

Rumination

Half of participants reported coping with bullying victimization through rumination. One participant described how he was frequently pinned against a locker, kicked, and called demeaning slurs by his bullies. Not only did this bullying negatively impact the participant’s

self-esteem, but he recalled dwelling on and re-living the bullying event, which caused further trauma and loss of self-esteem. He described his experience:

> "I thought for the next few weeks to months, I had, like, very low self-esteem, since [the perpetrator] said all those degrading terms. And they like always ran through my head. Like, I just kept on dwelling on what he said, and I can't, like, his face, his face while he was saying that. And everything was just, like, dwelling in my head." (Participant 18)

Another participant, bullied at school for several reasons including their height, Asperger's syndrome, and gender non-conformity, also reported the long-term effects of bullying, including rumination about the bullying event in the subsequent weeks and months. This participant's rumination resulted in them feeling unworthy of help. They describe their experience:

> "Even if you try and brush [the bullying] off, it still gets in your head, and it still eats away at you when you try and sleep. And mentally, it feels degrading. It's like you're not worthy of help; you don't deserve help; just brush it off." (Participant 12)

Engaging in Creative Endeavors

Over one third of participants also engaged in various creative outlets to process their feelings about bullying. Creative outlets included writing, drawing, creating music and listening

to music. These techniques provided SGMY the opportunity to release their emotions in healthy ways, improve their mood, increase feelings of self-worth, and decrease stress. For example, one participant shared their story of walking with their girlfriend when other students began to throw rocks at them. The participant reported the incident to school officials, but no further action was taken. In response to frustration over the bullying incident and the lack of consequences for the bullies, the participant explains how they chose to express their feelings:

> "I used to write a lot. And I mean, I still do, but it's different now. But, like, I would just write down, like, everything that I was feeling. And it would eventually, like, turn into something, like, a poem or, like, a song or something. And I have some friends who like to draw to get their feelings out. And I also listen to music a lot, like, just like block out the world." (Participant 11)

Similarly, another participant described their physical assault at school for being gay and effeminate. After the incident, the participant described how he coped with the attack through various distress tolerance techniques that improved the cognitive health of the participant and relieved stress.

> "So like, for example, when I got kicked, I just like took a bath so like it can relieve the pain. And I also enjoy taking a bath, so that's one coping mechanism that I use. Like, taking baths cause you're all alone and then, depends if you listen to music while you're taking a shower or bath…. And I usually paint out my feelings if I'm like angry or sad or happy. Um, or just going, or like going out for a run also relieves stress for me cause like

> I also enjoy running. Not like running long distances, but like maybe running mile around like the park. I enjoy doing that, that's fun." (Participant 18)

For another participant, to cope with verbal and physical bullying, the participant described engaging in multiple creative endeavors, but indicated it was not necessarily the activity they were doing that helped them cope, it was more so the repeated actions that helped calm themselves down.

> "So when I'm coping I'm either drawing, I'm doing something like repeatedly. So like, sometimes I'll even draw a bunch of lines on a piece of paper or count to ten and that will help a lot. Or for some reason, I seem to really like just closing my eyes, calming down, listening to some relaxing music. But it's mainly doing stuff repeatedly that I find really helps calms me down" (Participant 19)

Seeking Social and Emotional Support

Almost all participants reported relying on social supports to express emotions like anger, sadness, frustration, and anxiety. For example, one participant was holding hands with her girlfriend while walking home from school when a woman began to shout religious-based insults and threats to the couple. To process her feelings of fear and sadness, she explained why it was helpful to seek social support:

> "As long as I find that middle ground with someone and I talk it out, I am okay; I'll be fine. As long as I have their love and comfort; as long as I have, you know,

> their approval, their acceptance, I'm okay. I think that's what any LGBT person needs at this point in time." (Participant 20)

The vast majority of participants in the study emphasized the importance of talking about the bullying experience with friends, family, counselors, or school staff. This social and emotional support provided SGMY with sources of compassion and love and helped to buffer the effects of the bullying. Additionally, in most cases when SGMY sought social support and confined in their friends about their bullying, their friends helped to deter future bullying instances.

> "I've been keeping around a couple of scarier friends, it's kept me a lot safer at times….he [friend] has kept me safe from a couple of people in my past who had wished to maybe harass or make me feel uncomfortable." (Participant 2)

The result of friendship support provided SGMY with not only social and emotional support, but also physical support.

> "Like whenever I was with my friends when I was getting bullied or anything like that, how they reacted was they stood up for me and they were like hey you know what, knock it off. And there were people out there who actually did genuinely care about me even though we weren't biologically related." (Participant 12)

Self-Harm, Considering or Attempting Suicide

In more extreme cases, five SGMY reported having suicidal thoughts, making suicide attempts, and having suicide-related hospitalizations. Additionally, three more SGMY noted that they knew friends who were bullied to the brink of suicide attempts. One participant reported engaging in at least one instance of non-suicidal self-injurious behavior, such as cutting. This participant describes how the bullying led to cutting herself.

> "But, one night, you know when you're just upset and you're alone and you don't really know what to do, and you go for anything that would be a solution to your problem and so I cut maybe once or twice and it made me feel disgusting too, if I'm being honest." (Participant 13)

This participant acknowledged that cutting was not a long-term response to the bullying, but she hoped it would provide temporary relief to her pain.

In cases of considering suicide, a participant describes her experience in response to being called "gross", "fag" and being punched in the face from bullies. These experiences resulted in feelings of self-worthlessness and loneliness, in which the participant described considering suicide.

> "During that time, I was in a really rough patch in my life. So when that happened to me, I was just like, I'm not worth anything. And, like, if they say I need to die, then I guess I need to die. That I'm alone in the world, stuff like that. It was just a negative experience for me." (Participant 8)

These feelings of wanting to end one's life due to bullying was also mentioned by another participant who indicated that they were bullied because they were gay and had weight issues. After years of physical and verbal bullying, the participant described feeling depressed and not having a support system to help them deal with the bullying. These experiences ultimately led to at least one experience of attempting suicide.

> "Cause bullying can bring people to suicide, like it did, I actually tried to commit suicide. At that time I didn't have the support system I have now… And at some points I just wanted to end it. I wanted to be gone, I didn't want to have to deal with it [the bullying] anymore. It got really bad." (Participant 1)

Self-Acceptance and Community Connectedness

Over half of participants engaged in self-acceptance after instances of bullying. As a result of being bullied, many SGMY described feeling greater self-acceptance about themselves and their identity.

> "Remember that you are strong, and, you know, there is a world where we aren't all accepted yet. But if you just believe in yourself and try to you know, just overcome the obstacles, it will all be ok." (Participant 17)

In addition to self-acceptance, SGMY also described being more involved in the LGBTQ community, including volunteering at LGBTQ organizations, connecting other SGMY youth

online and in person, and one participant indicated that she started an LGBT positivity group on instagram. This sense of community connectedness, empowered SGMY and reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness.

> "Just knowing that this isn't a battle that you're in all by yourself, that there's people out there who support you even though they don't really one hundred percent know you, they still support you because they're on the same team as you." (Participant 12)

Problem-Focused Coping

Reporting the Bully

Related to seeking social support, over half of SGMY in this study sought to proactively stop the bullying from progressing by reporting the bullying to school staff. In the majority of bullying cases where bullying was reported, school policies and school administrators were not helpful in stopping the bullying or addressing the situation with the student responsible for the bullying, and in some cases, school administrators were the perpetrators. This participant describes their multiple experiences reporting bullying to school administrators and their responses.

> "I've told the teacher before, but they won't believe me. And if I've told the teacher and they do believe me, what they basically just do is talk to that person and tell them to not do it again, which obviously doesn't prevent anything or help at all." (Participant 18)

While the lack of effective action from school administrators to prevent and reprimand bullying was common, parental involvement pressured action from school administrators. One participant told her mother, who then spoke with school administrators about the bullying, and the bully was removed from school. As she describes:

> "So, I told my mom and she [the perpetrator] got kicked out. But she used to bully me a lot and pick on me a lot at school whenever she had the chance to." (Participant 14)

This participant had parental support in demanding action against bullying victimization. However, more commonly, participants who self-advocated to school administrators describe their concerns as being ignored or the consequences for bullying did not deter future attacks. When action was taken by school administrators against the perpetrator, one participant describes how they were ridiculed by other students for being a "snitch."

Ignoring or Blocking the Bully

Ignoring or blocking the bully was a common way SGMY coped with bullying, with over half indicating using these methods. One participant explained why he thought ignoring the bully is the best way to handle bullying. He believed that direct confrontation would escalate the harassment and feared retaliation from the bully. He also speculated that the bully was trying to get a reaction out of him and did not want to acknowledge the bullying.

> "So really your best bet is to just ignore it. Because the worst thing you can do is keep it going. If you try to fight back it's just going to egg them on. Which is sad, like I said. It shouldn't be like that, but it is." (Participant 1)

Another participant described after online and in-person bullying because of dressing and looking different, their response was to not give her bullies a reaction.

> "I stopped showing a reaction. I never, I was never very much reactionary in the first place but I stopped looking at them. And I stopped, I stopped talking about it, and they just, I guess they just got bored of me eventually." (Participant 15)

In addition to ignoring the bully, other participants created more distance between the bully and themselves. In situations where the bully and the victim were friends, some participants chose to end the negative friendship. Others took action by blocking the bully on social media as described by one participant as the bully was someone, they considered their best friend, but the relationship changed when the participant confided in their friend that they were bisexual.

> "I ended my friendship with her in August just because she was sending me rude things and saying mean things about me and I was just done with that finally." (Participant 4)

Similarly, another participant described how they enjoyed singing and were ridiculed because of this. This participant felt his peers would be talking behind his back, constantly heard rumors about him, and eventually disassociated himself with negative friendships.

> "I changed some of the friends that I hung out with. I started to hang out with people that I knew would be more accepting, people that I knew I could trust. (Participant 3)

Confronting the Bully

Rather than ignoring the bully, or when ignoring the bully failed to stop the harassment, about half of SGMY dealt with the problem by standing up for themselves and confronting the bully. In response to a bully repeatedly using "bisexual" as a slur, one participant describes how they spoke back to the bully after ignoring him had not worked:

> "I was pretty upset at first. I mean, it wasn't ok to insult me like that. So after the first few times I started saying something like, 'Hey, stop calling me that. It's not an insult; it's not okay for you to call me that.'" (Participant 5)

For this participant, standing up for themselves was not only empowering, but it also finally made the bullying stop. Several other participants voiced how confronting the bully gave them power and control over the situation.

> "So I'm mostly the person that goes out and like, "hey, this isn't ok, you need to stop."…I think you know we need to stand up for ourselves. You know we need to let

> people know that we are human beings, you know? And we deserve basic human rights that you aren't giving us, you know? (Participant 9)

Concealing their SGM Identity

Concealing one's identity was another common coping mechanism and included actions like removing rainbow pins or staying in the closet. One participant described after coming out in the eighth grade and receiving a barrage of hurtful slurs about her sexual orientation, the participant subsequently hid their sexuality to stop the bullying.

> "They were going to start pressuring me a lot about it. Like, why don't you like boys? And kind of just like really made me like uneasy and stuff, and I just kind of hid behind my like…I hid my sexuality really because like I was suck of everyone just coming at me about it." (Participant 17)

For other participants, after experiences of bullying, SGMY would subsequently indicate feelings of uneasiness and anxiety about being open about their sexuality. One participant described hiding their rainbow pin, which they feared would make them a target for future bullying.

> "I usually have a bag that has a pin on it, the rainbow with the flag on it and a hat. And usually whenever I feel worried I usually don't let myself wear that, if I feel that there is uncertainty in the scenario." (Participant 2)

These feelings were echoed by another participant who also described feeling like a target if they were to openly display a symbol of their sexuality or pride.

> "I can't really wave around like a pride flag or anything like that because, I mean I wish I could but I can't because I really feel that a lot of people are going to be judgmental about it…but if I wave that flag that also means I kind of, unfortunately, I am a target or something." (Participant 20)

Changing Environments

In extreme cases of bullying, SGMY had to create even more distance between themselves and the bully, which resulted in changing schools or being homeschooled. Surprisingly, one third of SGMY in our study indicated ever changing environments due to bullying. One participant faced several incidents of bullying, including being called "rapist", "pedophile", and "dyke". She was also ostracized from her friend group, and taunted with being "fake asked out". In response, this participant moved schools to get away from their bully:

> "I moved away from the town that I got bullied a lot in. So, I'm good. No complaints. I am not getting bullied anymore" (Participant 11)

While changing schools may have helped some participants, for one participant, she indicated changing schools three times due to bullying, all of which did not solve the problem. The participant now does independent study at home and described her experiences below:

> "I just moved out of the way. I have always lived farther away from my school. I don't live near my school. So nobody comes to where I live. So once I started staying at home and doing schoolwork at home, I just didn't have contact with anybody except the people that I knew weren't going to be hurtful towards me. And so that stopped. Although I know if I were go back again it would start right, like the first day I was back." (Participant 9)

Similarly, another participant reported changing schools because of extreme bullying and disassociating herself from other students in school. This participant reported that she eventually went back to her original school and that the bullying had subsided.

> "After I moved schools, I just never talked to anyone. And then, after I came back this year, I feel, um, everything's fine. I haven't done anything, I think it's now that we're older and it's like everyone is getting their mind, like a mind of their own." (Participant 13)

However, when changing schools, one SGMY also saw it as an opportunity to stop the bullying, which was based on her sexual orientation. As a result, this participant described going 'back in the closet' to deter bullying at her new school. Together, with making social media posts about her bullying experiences, joining a GSA, changing schools, and not being as open about her sexuality, the participant indicated that the bullying had stopped.

> "I'm low-key, I'm basically in the closet at this school. It's not like I go actively to hide it, but I just don't bring it up. Unless somebody asks me privately." (Participant 6)

Coping Flexibility

In response to experiences of bullying, all SGMY in our study employed several distinct coping mechanisms, often coped in several ways simultaneously, or changed how they coped over time. In general, shifting between emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies differed for each participant. One participant describes first confronting and speaking up against being bullied from a teacher who made a disparaging remark for holding another girls hand. This participant then recalls engaging in self-harm through cutting her wrists, before reaching out for social and emotional support through joining a Gay Straight Alliance, helping her to ignore the bullies.

> "And we all have our meeting place at the Gay Straight Alliance. And in the end I guess, it never really did stop, but you just kind of stop realizing it I guess. Like after a while, you just get used to it and you kind of don't really realize it anymore." (Participant 7)

Another participant reported multiple experiences of bullying and their response to the bullying. First, the participant described trying to confront the bully, seeking help through friends and reporting the bully through school administrators. Because the bullying continued, she decided to leave that school and be home-schooled instead. The participant describes her experiences of disparaging responses to bullying below.

> "And I knew that I couldn't do anything about it, because I've already tried to get help. I've already tried to talk to them. And it really sucked" (Participant 9)

Finally, due to harassment of her sexual orientation, one participant describes how she sought support from the school therapist and friends, how her friends help to deter future bullying, reading books to help take her mind off bullying, ignoring the bullying and how experiences of bullying promoted self-acceptance.

> "At the end of the day, it all comes back to you. And I just stopped caring. Cause there's always going to be somebody who has an opinion of you, but the only opinion that matters is yours." (Participant 10)

In the case of this participant, the bullying eventually did stop. Despite the unfortunate experiences of bullying, this participant, along with many in our sample, displayed great resiliency in coping and building self-worth from negative experiences.

Discussion

This study examined the coping mechanisms used by a diverse sample of SGMY in response to experiences of bullying victimization. Overall, SGMY in our study employed multiple emotion-focused and problem-focused coping mechanisms and all SGMY engaged in coping flexibility, whereby SGMY would engage in various coping mechanisms. Additionally, through bullying victimization and coping, many SGMY in our study discussed how they grew from these experiences and how it affected their self-worth, respect, and community activism.

Our findings add to extant literature by adding further context to coping strategies employed by SGMY and demonstrates the resilience of SGMY.

Among emotion-focused coping mechanisms, SGMY frequently described frequent rumination about the bullying event. Consistent with the current literature, rumination often led to increased distress, self-harming behaviors, and suicidal ideation (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2008; Nolen -Hoeksema, 2000). For most SGMY in our study, those who engaged in rumination also reported engaged in more adaptive coping strategies such as seeking social supports. In fact, almost all SGMY sought social support from friends, supportive family, school counselors, and other SGM individuals. The use of social support as a response to stress is consistent across qualitative and quantitative research on SGMY (Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015; Marshall et al., 2015). Our findings add to existing literature by indicating that for most SGMY who sought social support from friends, they later indicated that (once aware of the bullying) their friends became protective and helped deter future bullying. Moreover, our findings of engaging in emotion-regulation through creative endeavors add to existing literature identifying among sexual minority youth that identify sports, music and poetry as pathways to cope (Madsen & Green, 2012; McDavitt et al., 2008). Instead, we found, it was not necessarily about the actions of creative endeavors such as writing or drawing, it was more so about repeated actions, which helped one participant find calmness and cope.

Two problem-focused coping mechanisms that were often cited together were changing environments and concealing SGMY identities. For some SGMY who changed environments due to bullying, when changing schools, they often concealed their sexual orientation due to fear of bullying at the new school. Further, among SGMY who did not change schools, concealing

identity occurred after bullying instances as a way to protect themselves from perceived safety concerns. We identified youth chose not to wear visible signs of LGBTQ pride such as a rainbow pin or rainbow flag, despite being open about their sexuality to friends and family. These findings add nuance to existing literature on how SGMY conceal their identities through less visible LGBTQ symbolism (Bry, Mustanski, Garofalo, & Burns, 2017; Dewaele, Van Houtte, Cox, & Vincke, 2013). Lastly, ignoring the bully/bullying was a common coping response by SGMY. While ignoring the bully/bullying may be classified as an avoidance coping strategy (Roth & Cohen, 1986; White Hughto, Pachankis, Willie, & Reisner, 2017), our study found cognitive and behavioral ignoring also was associated with adaptive coping to deter further bullying. For example, SGMY in our study who cognitively ignored bullying did this as a means to display they were not bothered by the bullying and in some cases, the bullying ceased. Additionally, behaviorally ignoring bullying consisted of blocking and ending friendships with negative friends. These findings add current qualitative context to quantitative findings from Hunter et al. (2004) for how we understand the implications of ignoring bullying (Hunter, Mora-Merchan, & Ortega, 2004).

Notably, study participants described significant coping flexibility between emotion- and problem-focused coping strategies, in which they used several coping mechanisms simultaneously, and changed their coping mechanisms over time. For example, many SGMY reported ruminating extensively about the bullying event, but decided to later process their emotions with social support. Likewise, as an immediate response to the bullying event, a common form of coping was ignoring the bully, which including blocking them on social media and ignoring them at school. Similar behavior among SGMY has been shown in several prior studies (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015; Grossman, 2009; McDavitt et al., 2008). In this way, the

SGMY transitioned from a coping mechanism deemed less useful to one that left them feeling empowered or supported.

Our study has broad clinical implications for bullying victimizations and supporting SGMY. Most important, SGMY must feel safe and protected within their school. In more cases than not, SGMY discussed either not feeling protected by school staff, often being placed the blame when bullying occurred, or in some cases being victimized by staff members. However, in positive cases of staff helping SGMY, they noted programs such as GSA's and rainbow stickers on doors displaying, allyship and safe spaces for SGMY. Such programs have demonstrated efficacy in increasing perceived safety (Ioverno, Belser, Baiocco, Grossman, & Russell, 2016; Poynter & Tubbs, 2008), and these programs as well as trainings to support SGMY should be expanded. Additionally, SGMY in our sample described how being open about their sexual and gender identity empowered them, allowed them to access greater community and social supports, and reduced feelings of loneliness. Thus, schools can bolster SGMY resilience with LGBTQ resources widely available such as local and national LGBTQ organizations, resources for coming out, and connecting students with social supports. Further, all students should be taught the skills to effectively handle conflict resolution. One example is a program introduced at a California elementary school called Conflict resolution education (CRE), which teaches students how to understand a conflict, social, emotional, and cognitive processes related to constructive conflict management, principles of conflict resolution and skills required to enact constructive conflict management (Lane-Garon, Yergat, & Kralowec, 2012). However, helping SGMY cope with bullying victimization may only temporarily be beneficial for SGMY as broader environmental and systemic structures perpetuate stigma against SGM individuals. Thus, broader systemic change such as comprehensive anti-bullying policies inclusive of sexual orientation and

gender identity are needed so that SGMY are granted the freedom to self-express their identity or gender without the threat of bullying victimization.

Study Strengths and Limitations

Although valuable information was obtained in this qualitative study, it is also important to consider the limitations of the results. First, the use of a cross-sectional design inhibits causal inference and the ability to determine what effect each coping mechanism had on mental health outcomes. Second, while we identified coping techniques unique to SGMY as well as coping strategies previously found in other studies, the present study did not examine within-group differences (e.g., by race/ethnicity or gender identity) in coping strategies among SGMY. We support future research that characterizes the profiles of SGMY who choose to engage in different types of coping strategies and identify subgroups of SGMY in most need of coping-focused interventions. Third, our study utilized retrospective accounts of bullying and coping and thus, recall bias and interpretive bias may exist. In addition to limitations, this study also has many strengths. Moreover, given that these interviews were conducted online using Skype, we were able to interact with many youths despite geographic limitations. Incorporating a face-to-face aspect to these interviews allowed us to gain the benefits of face-to-face interviewing such as building rapport, in an online environment meant to provide convenience and safety to our participants (Enochsson, Avdelningen för, Karlstads, & Estetisk-filosofiska, 2011; Janghorban, Latifnejad Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). Lastly, our study provided SGMY the opportunity to openly discuss their bullying experiences in a safe and non-judgmental environment. Many SGMY expressed gratitude for this opportunity and this research, especially those who felt unheard or unimportant. We believe that our rapport with participants enriched our data, and these interviews provided an outlet for these youths to feel heard.

Conclusion

These findings contribute to emerging research on how SGMY cope with experiences of bullying victimization and identify unique findings associated with engaging in creative endeavors, seeking social supports and ignoring bullying. Additionally, these insights provide nuance on future interventions that include conflict resolution and resilience building. Overall, the varied coping responses practiced by SGMY illustrate how different experiences of victimization manifest within individuals and how these individuals react. Future research should explore how SGMY develop these coping mechanisms, and if coping strategies differ between different stressors. Ultimately, further understanding the coping mechanisms used by SGMY and reducing SGM-based discrimination will be necessary to improve health and well-being of all SGMY.

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Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclosure.

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Table 1: Overall Demographic Results of Participants (N=20)

	n (%)
Age	
14	3 (15)
15	5 (25)
16	5 (25)
17	5 (25)
18	2 (10)
Race/Ethnicity	
African American	4 (20)
Asian	2 (10)
Hispanic/Latino	3 (15)
Mixed Race	4 (20)
White	7 (35)
Gender Identity	
Cisgender Male	4 (20)
Cisgender Female	10 (50)
Transgender	2 (10)
Another Gender Identity	4 (20)
Sexual Identity	
Gay	4 (20)
Lesbian	6 (30)
Bisexual	10 (50)

Table 2: Participant Identities (N=20)

Participant Number	Age (years)	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity
1	16	Cisgender Male	Gay	White and American Indian
2	18	Cisgender Male	Gay	White
3	17	Cisgender Male	Gay	White
4	17	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	White
5	15	Another Gender Identity	Bisexual	White
6	16	Cisgender Female	Lesbian	Asian
7	14	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	White
8	15	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	African American
9	16	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	African American and White
10	15	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	African American
11	17	Another Gender Identity	Bisexual	American Indian, Hispanic/Latino, and White
12	14	Another Gender Identity	Lesbian	White
13	16	Cisgender Female	Lesbian	Hispanic/Latino
14	15	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	African American
15	15	Another Gender Identity	Bisexual	Hispanic/Latino
16	14	Transgender	Bisexual	Asian
17	15	Cisgender Female	Lesbian	African American
18	16	Cisgender Male	Gay	Hispanic/Latino
19	18	Transgender	Bisexual	White
20	14	Cisgender Female	Lesbian	Asian/White/ Native Hawaiian